

Growing in Loving Others Well: Grace-Oriented Marriage

I. “GRACE THROUGH FAITH THAT NONE SHOULD BOAST” (EPH. 2:8-9)

- A. In the book of Ephesians, Paul establishes an extraordinarily high bar for both husbands and wives in marriage. In presenting his vision for marriage, Paul understands that marriages in the New Covenant can express something astonishing and beautiful that they could not before. This is why Paul’s marital exhortation begins with “...be filled with the Spirit.” (Eph. 5:18). Paul confidently calls the people of God to a high vision because he understands life in the New Covenant as a grace-oriented, Spirit-filled life that transforms weak and broken people and empowers them to obey.
- B. We cannot respond to God’s vision for marriage with our “yes”—in real confidence—apart from understanding the New Covenant that empowers it. The same power from heaven freely given to us through Christ at the new birth is the same power that can help us grab hold of the “secret” to a healthy, joyful marriage. When I first read Paul’s command in Ephesians 5:25, “love your wife like Christ loves the church,” I shrank back from marriage certain that I could never honor that command. Grace offers the possibility of doing what seemed impossible to me as a younger man. Faith understands that, while Paul’s command is impossible on my own, with God, “all things are possible.” The Spirit gives us the command through the Scripture because He is fully confident in His ability to help us walk it out.
- C. We are to say “yes” to grace with confidence, rather than shrinking back from a high vision in fear and unbelief. The higher the biblical standard, the more confident we can be in the “help of heaven” to empower us to reach it. There is great joy to be found in laying hold of Christ’s vision for marriage and the power available from heaven to help us love our spouses well.
- D. The enemies of a grace-orientation in marriage (and dating) are unbiblical *idealism* or *fatalism*. Both come from self-centered ideas about marriage—the idea of marriage as a means to personal fulfillment or, even worse, personal failure.
 - 1. *“Destructive to marriage is the self-fulfillment ethic that assumes marriage and the family are primarily institutions of personal fulfillment, necessary for us to become “whole” and happy. The assumption is that there is someone just right for us to marry and that if we look closely enough we will find the right person. This moral assumption overlooks a crucial aspect to marriage. It fails to appreciate the fact that we always marry the wrong person. We never know whom we marry; we just think we do. Or even if we first marry the right person, just give it a while and he or she will change. For marriage, being [the enormous thing it is] means we are not the same person after we have entered it. The primary problem is . . . learning how to love and care for the stranger to whom you find yourself married.”¹*

¹ Stanley Hauerwas, “Sex and Politics: Bertrand Russell and ‘Human Sexuality,’” *Christian Century*, April 19, 1978, 417–422.

2. *“If our views of marriage are too romantic and idealistic, we underestimate the influence of sin on human life. If they are too pessimistic and cynical, we misunderstand marriage’s divine origin. If we somehow manage, as our modern culture has, to do both at once, we are doubly burdened by a distorted vision.”*—Tim Keller, **The Meaning of Marriage**

E. The gospel’s power is far more potent than we realize. More than delivering us out of our former state into a new relationship with God, it has the power to change our mindsets, emotions, and desires in a powerful way that enables us to love differently and deeply. Nothing forces us to repent more deeply and more profoundly like continually hurting the one we love the most.

II. **“WALK CAREFULLY, NOT AS FOOLS BUT AS WISE” (EPH. 5:15-21)**

A. Many forget that Paul’s teaching on marriage begins in Ephesians 5:15 rather than 5:22. In calling believers to “walk carefully” with wisdom, he establishes the critical truths we need to walk out loving one another well in marriage. Paul lays out five lifestyle practices—“the will of the Lord” (v. 17)—that are essential to healthy relationships:

1. ***“Do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit.” (v. 18)***
Being drunk with wine exposes the truth of who you are now in “dissipation” (wasteful self-indulgence); being filled with the Spirit expresses the beginnings of the truth of who you will be forever in Christ (“wasteful” self-sacrifice).
2. ***“Speak to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs...” (v. 19a)***
The truths of Scripture are to invade and permeate our conversations and how we speak to one another.
3. ***“...making melody in your heart to the Lord.” (v. 19b)***
The truths of Scripture are to invade our heart and move us deeply.
4. ***“...giving thanks always for all things...” (v. 20)***
The gospel, the love of Jesus, and the extravagant “riches” of His grace and mercy towards us work to orient us to a perspective of constant gratitude rather than a bent towards entitlement and a sense of what we “deserve.”
5. ***“...submitting to one another in the fear of God.” (v. 21)***
 - a. A people filled with the Spirit and the Word of God, moved by the truths of Scripture with deep gratitude can therefore honor and consider one another without fear, self-protection, or self-absorption. When we understand how extravagantly Jesus loves and values others around us, we see them as “better than ourselves” (Phil. 2:3) in humility.
 - b. God has established me as the primary authority of my household, yet I yield to my wife often related to wisdom and perspective that I lack and have great need. I must do the same in many contexts where I am the established authority, yet joyfully submit to my friends and comrades in humility and honor.

- B. It is not possible to express Eph. 5:22-33 well without seeking to grow in the lifestyle practices of Eph. 5:15-21. They are the keys to healthy relationships that provide the foundation for healthy marriages.

III. **“WIVES, SUBMIT TO YOUR HUSBANDS...” (EPH. 5:22-24)**

- A. **The Unpopular Message of Submission to Authority:** Wives are called to lay down their own personal rights and independence and join their life to another, and, in doing so, *submit to another’s leadership*. The inherent risk and danger in this is—the risk of pain, heartache, and much loss is very powerful.
- B. A woman is called to give up **much** in the context of marriage and risk **much** to submit to the authority of a very weak and broken vessel often incapable of leading effectively or well with consistency, stability, confidence, and true spiritual authority. It is difficult for a woman to confidently obey this command of God.
- C. What Jesus asks women to do in marriage is very difficult. However, by yielding to the leadership of another weak and broken human being, wives have the opportunity to experience the hope and power of the gospel as it transforms the way their husband loves and leads. Grace experienced personally is to become the lens through which we view those around us. Offense and bitterness come from a resolution of the heart that the one who wounded us will always wound us and will probably never change. For one who is alive in the truths of grace and the gospel, this is impossible. We refuse to see anyone or any weakness as greater than the power of the love and grace of God to transform.
- D. Wives are invited to submit to more than a person, but to a process—one in which God transforms weak and broken leaders into “safe” and enjoyable men to follow as they grow in wisdom and tenderness before the Lord. Wives are invited to be a loving part of that process, not as the dominating force that demands change, but as a loving “servant” and intercessor, embracing confident meekness and trust in the superior power of grace and the love of Jesus to radically transform the heart and the home. The concept of a wife serving a husband as he matures in love is incredibly unpopular today in a world that sees little dignity and value in serving. *The call to submission in marriage is a call to love Jesus and trust Him with the leadership and care of a woman’s heart and life.*

IV. **“HUSBANDS, LOVE YOUR WIVES AS CHRIST LOVES THE CHURCH...” (EPH. 5:25-33)**

- A. Paul spends the rest of his teaching on marriage focused on the husbands. Why? Because wives are called to **submission** in marriage, but husbands are called to **sacrifice**. Paul is doing more than establishing the “governmental order” of a marriage; he is explaining a “**great mystery**” related to the human heart and how it was made to respond to love. Marriage is a collision between two self-interested people who live in constant fear of losing their personal rights to one another. Each spouse could ask, “If I give in, what more will I lose? Why should they always get their way?”

- B. Men are called by Paul to express something more than “earthly authority,” or as Jesus called it, “pagan authority” (Luke 22:25). Men must embrace a “kingdom paradigm” of authority and the way that Jesus embodies and expresses it. Believers do not “lord their authority” over others; we are to see authority as a means to make someone else great. Whatever power, influence, or resource men are entrusted with from heaven, they are to “wield” it (utilize it) in the manner of Christ—fighting for someone else’s destiny and calling.
- C. Apostolic authority does not reflect the American “top down” model of authority. It reflects a kingdom model that finds greatness in serving, giving, and sacrificing for the good of those we are called to lead and love.
- D. Therefore the man is called to a sacrificial love—a “giving of himself”—in the manner of Christ that may be even more difficult than the assignment God gave the woman in marriage. “Like Christ loves the church” is an entirely different model of authority and how it is to be expressed with meekness, servant-heartedness, and self-sacrificial humility with a prophetic spirit.
- E. **The Issue of the Knowledge of God and Growing in Love:** *How* does Jesus love the church? It is a lifelong pursuit of understanding to answer and apply the question to our own lives. One of the greatest problems that young people face in the early stages of romance is the trivialization of the very idea of love itself. Because we have, as a society, taken our eyes off the very source and definition of love Himself, Jesus of Nazareth, we have repackaged love into a storm of emotions that barely resemble the biblical ideal.
- F. Beyond trivializing and diminishing love, our culture has shifted our focus from love from God, for God, and for others to “love for ourselves.” Our greatest pursuit must always be the knowledge of God and encountering His love. As we pursue the One who has found us, loved us, and saved us, we are empowered to love Him back with all of our hearts, which must be our highest priority and greatest goal. If these words define the rhythm of how we live our lives, we will express *true* love deeply and authentically. For the one who is in Christ, love is something far deeper and more powerful than a Hollywood romance.
- G. We must define and express love by the One who gave all to fight for our present lives and ultimate destiny in Him. We can define love through the lens of the **incarnation**—He *pursued* us in humility. We can define it through the **cross**—He *fought* for us in a costly way. We can define love through the lens of the **gospel**—He *values* our lives and *cherishes* our love, and through the lens of His ongoing **intercession** for our destiny—He *prays* for us and *prophesies* over us. There is *much* that could be said beyond this about His glorious leadership in our lives and the way that He directs and cares for our heart in the journey of knowing Him and loving Him back.
- H. The subject of the love of Christ is a vast one that we are to spend the rest of our lives getting lost in. The revelation of the love of Christ—the experiential knowledge of it—instructs us in how to love well and serves as an anchor that holds our hearts firm during the storms of life.

- I. Paul is *gospel-oriented* in the way that he views marriage. In the same way that Christ loved us *first*—empowering us to respond and love Him back—husbands are to be the ones who “love first” in marriage in a way that empowers wives to confidently trust their leadership and love well in return. In conflict, in disagreement, in serving, in giving, the husband is commanded to love first in a way that establishes a safe context for his wife to love him back. The greater burden of love in a marriage is placed upon the husband. The husband must lose the fight for his personal rights *first* in order to fight for his bride’s heart.
- J. Another part of the process is the command that the husband love *freely*, with no thought of what he “gains” in the exchange. Whether or not his wife loves him back, a husband is called to love sacrificially. He is to give all of his heart to honor, cherish, and value the one whom God has joined him to, regardless of behavior, circumstance, or emotions in the moment. The commitment of the husband to his bride must be defined by something greater than the behavior of his wife. In the same way that Jesus loves the husband freely, so he is empowered to love his bride in the same way.
- K. Finally, the husband is invited to love his bride *fully*, fighting for her destiny and future with all of his might and resource. A husband does not have to fight for his own destiny; Jesus is fighting for him with great grace and fierce loyalty. Thus a husband is free to fight for his bride and the godly desires of her heart. He does not view his wife as a resource to make his life work, or to make his calling great. He is free to view his bride through the eyes of Christ and, by grace, fight for what Jesus envisions.